

Saturday, Feb. 5, 1983

C Section

Adventists keep faith, despite advent of doubt

Monetary woes hurt, but the church finds even its doctrinal roots questioned

By ROBERTA GREEN

Sun Staff Writer

For the 3.8 million-member Seventh-day Adventist Church, an organization long unified by its goal of "finishing the work" of Jesus Christ on earth, the past three years have not been easy.

Best known for its practices of Saturday worship, vegetarianism, and worldwide mission outreach, the church has been forced to face potentially crippling assaults on its financial and theological foundations. Yet, stiff as the challenges have been, the church appears to have weathered the storm.

The roots of the church's financial woes can be traced to one man — Donald Davenport — an Adventist surgeon-turned-developer now living in Corona Del Mar, Calif. For decades, millions of dollars from church trust funds were invested with Davenport. In July 1981, he filed for bankruptcy, owing church organizations \$21 million and individual Adventists several more million.

Last year, The Sun found that Davenport had paid some Adventist officials interest rates many times higher than the rate paid church organizations or layman. And church officials seemed to violate Adventist investment and conflict of interest guidelines.

In a bid to restore church credibility, world Adventist leader Neal Wilson announced in January after a lengthy investigation that nearly 100 top Adventist officials will be disciplined for their misdeeds with Davenport. About half of these officials will be subject to an unprecedented public rebuke. And a dozen may be demoted, fired or stripped of their ministerial credentials.

Costly as that financial debacle has been, theological questions may cost the church far more. The charge that church founder Ellen Gould White (1827-1915) plagiarized the bulk of her prolific writings calls into question much more than the integrity of certain church leaders. It questions, instead, the very foundation of the church's teachings.

In 1846 White, known as the "spirit of prophecy," drew together a group of Christian believers shattered by the "Great Disappointment" of Oct. 22, 1844. On that day, according to the Rev. Charles Miller, the Second Coming or Advent of Jesus Christ was to take place. Thousands of American Protestants eagerly awaited the event; some even sold their property and went to a New York mountaintop to meet their savior. When he did not arrive, White said that she had received a vision showing that rather than returning to earth on Oct. 22, Jesus had moved into a new "sanctuary" in heaven to begin "investigative judgment" of the lives of believers. Later she claimed a second vision returning worship to the sabbath or seventh day, hence the name Seventh-day Adventists.

In her lifetime, White claimed to have numerous visions and wrote more than 25 million words, including nearly 50 books. Though the church never officially recognized her works as the inspired Word of God, to many followers White was the last word on everything from vegetarianism to matters of dress. As Loma Linda University associate professor of church history Jonathan Butler puts it, Adventists believed the Bible to be the church's final authority "because Ellen White told me so."

However, according to Fritz Guy, professor of theology at the Adventist Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Mich., such high esteem did not exist before White's death. "Since Ellen White's death, there has been a kind of deification," he said. "While she was alive, it was very clear she was human." For example, in 1851 James White, Ellen White's husband, wrote that the Bible, not the words of Ellen White, is "a perfect rule of faith and duty."

Nevertheless, that view quickly changed and as early as 1919, church leaders meeting in a Bible Conference at Tacoma Park, Wash., realized that they had a problem on their hands. Not only did they recognize the fallibility of White's words, but they acknowledged she had drawn heavily on the writings of other health reformers and spiritual leaders of her age. They declined, however, to insist that those facts be taught throughout the church, fearing such knowledge would undermine the beliefs of the faithful.

Eventually, though, word got around, and not a few Adventists have begun voicing their doubts about White and her teachings. In the mid-1970s Ronald Numbers, an Adventist physician who has since left the church, published a book called "Ellen White: Prophetess of Health" in which he casts doubt on the supernatural origins of White's health pronouncements. In the late 1970s Desmond Ford, an



Adventist founder Ellen Gould White

Australian theologian and professor at the Adventist Pacific Union College in Northern California, questioned White's sanctuary vision, arguing that it could not be supported by the Bible. In fact, he said, the notion of investigative judgment denied the Protestant, Bible-based teaching of salvation by faith not by works. Ford's question prompted the founding of the independent journal "Evangelica" and the subsequent withdrawal of seminarians and pastors from the church. Ford himself was defrocked in 1980.

Though that challenge shook academia, the controversy didn't really heat up until a Long Beach Adventist minister, Walter Rea, charged that White drew at least 80 percent of her writings from the works of others, often word for word. Rea documented his findings in a bitter book called "The White Lie" published in April 1982. He questions not only White's claim to inspiration but her honesty, promising to show in his next book that most of White's books were written by aides when she was senile. Defrocked in 1981, Rea now lives in Patterson, Calif.

On top of all that, another Adventist, Delbert Hodder, a pediatrician and teacher at the University of Connecticut, even suggested that White's visions were really the result of epileptic seizures, caused from her being hit in the head with a rock as a child.

Butler of Loma Linda University has suggested that these questions are in part a direct result of White's own emphasis on education. From the beginning, Adventists have established academies, colleges, universities to train their young people. In the

1950s, seeking to gain accreditation for their medical school, Adventists began sending students to secular universities. Eventually, Butler said, that trend spilled over into other disciplines and soon Adventists were being educated in the nation's most respected graduate and professional schools. Consequently, even the writings of Ellen White herself came in for scholarly scrutiny.

Some church observers argue that the very scholarly nature of the dispute limits its effect. According to Kenneth Wood, for 17 years the editor of the official church journal "The Adventist Review and Herald" published in Washington, D.C., "95 percent of the church isn't the least bit disturbed by all of this." And, Charles Sandefur, pastor of the 600-member Corona, Calif. Seventh-day Adventist Church, agreed. "I have more people still coming to me concerned about their marriage and their kids than I do about Ellen White and the 2,300 days (the sanctuary teaching)," he said. "If you took a poll of 100 Adventist ministers and asked them how many of them had preached a sabbath morning message on the sanctuary message, I bet you wouldn't get two."

By one count, however, as many as 120 pastors and teachers have either been forced to resign or expelled from the church. Though some church leaders argue that figure is high, most admit that between 700 and 1,000 people did withdraw from the North American branch of the church over these issues. That figure, however, is hardly earth-shaking when you consider that the church's total North American membership is 590,000, just 17 percent of

the worldwide church.

Though independent publications, such as "Evangelica" and "LimboLine," did spring up to provide a forum for dissent, even the most respected of them, the 10-year-old, "Spectrum," has never had more than 5,000 subscribers.

Clearly, despite the disillusionment of some and the pain of many more, the Seventh-day Adventist church is intact, no schism in sight. In fact, some observers see all this soul-searching as simply a necessary stage in the 150-year-old church's growing up process.

Yet, according to Sandefur, those low numbers are no proof that the struggles over Ford and Rea will not have a lasting effect on Ellen White's remnant church. "Mrs. White kind of defined our existence," he said. "To call her into question is to call into question our identity."

From coast to coast church leaders agree that the findings of Ford, Rea, and others have forced the Adventist Church to face two issues: the question of Ellen White's authority and the question of church identity. According to Guy of Andrew University, what's really at stake is whether the church will allow room for a variety of views on the issues or close the door on differences and withdraw from the world the way the Amish (a Christian sect that refuses even to use modern appliances) have done and become a world unto themselves.

According to Butler, the way Adventists choose to view Ellen White is the key to understanding that question. "The understanding of Ellen White's authority that's undergoing a change ... is symbolic of the change the church is undergoing," he said. "Ellen White, she's kind of the Ft. Knox, the gold that backs up the currency."

If White is seen as some kind of oracle like the Mormon's Joseph Smith, he explained, then the church will turn in on itself. If she is seen, rather, as a Martin Luther or a John Wesley (founder of the Methodist Church), the church will inevitably open itself up to other Christians and the rest of the world.

Few think the church will go the way of the Amish. Officially, the church has stood behind Ellen White without casting her as an infallible oracle. A statement published in the Dec. 23, 1982 issue of *The Review* described the Bible as the "inspired" and "infallible" Word of God, "the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God's acts in history."

The statement went on to say that the Holy Spirit's gift of prophecy was manifested in Ellen White and "her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction and correction. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested."

Beyond that the church upholds White's sanctuary doctrine on the basis that it is supported by the Bible and states that her admitted use of literary sources and assistants does not "negate the inspiration of her writings."

That stand may well be the most significant result of the church's soul-searching. "The position of the church emerged quite clearly that the source of Adventist teachings must be the Bible. This, I think, is a very important development," said William Johnson, present editor of *The Review* and the first person with a scholarly background to hold the position. He added that the church's statement should begin "opening up doors to some other evangelical Christians that have wondered if we were a cult."

To many mainstream evangelicals (Christians who revere the Bible as the inspired Word of God and place emphasis on an individual's personal experience with Jesus Christ), Adventists could not be regarded as a true Christian church because they had their own separate scripture — the writings of Ellen White. Some denominations had even gone so far as to publish literature and support mission drives to convince people to leave the "cult of Adventism."

Such actions served to build walls of misunderstanding and fear between Adventists and many other Christians. By reaffirming the Bible as the sole authority for faith and practice, Adventists have placed themselves in line with the evangelical mainstream. As a result, some of those walls may begin to come down.

Within the church, however, that stand may not end the struggle. In fact, Sandefur criticized the church leadership for spending too much time on the political aspects of how to deal with Davenport, Ford, and Rea when what the church really needs is a new vision of White's lasting contribution to the church.

"Most denominational literature responds to attacks, so to speak attacks, that have been made on Ellen White rather than trying to create some new

(Please see Adventists, C-3)

Warm hearts and new members are filling the pews at Loveland

By STEVE COOPER

Sun Staff Writer

FONTANA — In 1975, First Baptist Church of North Fontana was a nice little church on Mango Avenue.

With its 50 or so members, First Baptist was just another of those aging buildings where a struggling black congregation gathered each week to sing, shout and praise the Lord.

Today, the church has been transformed into Loveland Baptist Church, a nice big church. More than the name has changed.

Loveland is housed now in a modern, but not flashy, facility at Base Line and Sierra Avenue. Attendance has skyrocketed to about 1,400 on an average Sunday.

The congregation is still about 80 per cent black. However, the church's leadership — directed by Pastor Chuck Singleton — is aggressively plotting to increase the number of other racial groups within the church during next two years.

"We feel the make-up of the church body should reflect the racial mix of the area. And the area is very mixed, racially," said Singleton, himself black.

The plan appears headed toward success. The friendliness and Christian love emphasized and expressed at Loveland transcend racial barriers.

Singleton, an increasingly popular and influential pastor throughout the state, believes his congregation can serve as a role model for other churches

moving toward evangelistic, multi-racial outreach. Such high goals have not always appeared likely for the church.

The pastor was on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ when he first visited the church. He traveled to college campuses throughout the nation in the early 1970s to speak about Christian apologetics, the branch of theology having to do with defense and proofs of Christianity.

"A couple of pastor friends recommended I check this church out because I was living in the area and needed a home church to attend," said Singleton, in a quiet voice typical of his gentle manner. "Well, I came out and saw this tiny church in a field of weeds and I didn't know if I'd quite fit in. It was kind of a different atmosphere than we had back home in Chicago."

But the congregation made up in warmth what it lacked in numbers and Singleton was hooked. He attended for a couple of years as a church member.

When the pastor left in 1975, Singleton was asked to fill in as a temporary pastor. Soon he was asked to accept the ministry permanently and he became a pastor for the first time.

"We didn't take off real fast," said the 33-year-old preacher. "I think we had only about 100 people attending as recently as 1978."

But the young minister was assimilating instruc-



Pastor Charles Singleton of Loveland Baptist Church in Fontana.

(Please see Loveland, C-3)

Staff photo by Paul O'Neill